

Documents on Diplomacy: Resources

Briefing Memo: Isolationism & the Interwar Period

The “Great” War was the reference point for virtually all American diplomacy during the 1920s. The successful conclusion to a series of international arms control and disarmament conferences gave Americans the sense that their world was now safer. It was not. In 1928, French Foreign Minister Aristide Briand and U.S. Secretary of State Frank Kellogg—eventually joined by almost every nation on Earth—signed the Kellogg–Briand Pact, which outlawed war. But all the pacts and treaties were an illusion and their gains were temporary at best. Only the treaties which regulated the worst excesses of the last war would have any long-term relevance.

The United States had been shaken by German attempts to undermine U.S. security on its southern boundaries in 1917 and wrestled during the early 1920s with instability in Santo Domingo and Nicaragua. But in 1928, President Coolidge began the slow process of improving U.S. relations with Latin America. The process was nourished by President Hoover on a seven-week goodwill tour, but ultimately credited to President Franklin Roosevelt. The change in policy would have important consequences for the United States as the world situation worsened.

Japan's "Paramount Interest"

During World War I, relations with Japan became more troubled when the Japanese took advantage of American preoccupation with Europe to seize Germany's Pacific Island possessions and its territory in the Chinese province of Shantung. The Japanese believed that they had a “paramount interest” in China—and they thought that Secretary of State Lansing, agreed with them. In September 1931, Japan staged a minor explosion as a pretext for an invasion of Manchuria, but the League of Nations did nothing and the United States maintained its distance even while acknowledging the truth of Chinese claims.

The lessons of U.S. hesitation and League of Nations weakness were not lost on Italian Premier Benito Mussolini when Italy invaded the weak nation of Ethiopia in 1935. President Roosevelt sent a letter to Mussolini to plead for peace,

but was rebuffed. The League of Nations failed to halt the aggression, although the United States—for the first time—sent an observer to the League Council. It made no difference to the situation of Ethiopia, but American isolationists were incensed.

As some Americans realized that the treaties of the 1920s would not protect them from instability, they struggled to develop a system which would provide for American neutrality in any future conflict. In 1935, Congress passed a Neutrality Act prohibiting the sale or transport of armaments to belligerents and warning Americans that overseas travel would be at their own risk; an attempt to prevent the causes of the last war from dragging the United States into the next one. As the global situation worsened, those provisions were strengthened in 1936. President Roosevelt told Americans that he was determined to adopt “every practicable” measure to avoid war.

An Appeal to Hitler

In 1938, Nazi Germany invaded Czechoslovakia and President Roosevelt appealed personally to German Chancellor Adolph Hitler for a peaceful solution. Hitler had no response. Roosevelt tried again to reach out to Hitler not once but twice in April 1939. No response.

In August 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union signed a secret nonaggression pact, which freed Germany to dismember the largely defenseless nation of Poland. The Germans invaded on September 1, 1939, and Great Britain and France declared war on September 3rd.

The last furious American debate on neutrality began, but the President made it clear that question was no longer just one of avoiding a war or not. It was a matter of national security: “Some of our people like to believe that wars in Europe and in Asia are of no concern to us. But it is a matter of most vital concern to us that European and Asiatic war-makers should not gain control of the oceans which lead to this hemisphere.” It was time to choose a side and there was no doubt—in the President’s mind—what side that would be. ■